

Chapter 3

Interpreting African Cultural Heritage at Historic Sites

African-American cultural heritage is increasingly included in the interpretation of historic sites open to the public. This chapter describes examples of interpretive programs that address Africanisms. Some African-related messages are more direct than others; some follow more conventional models; others require new means of analysis. Ultimately, using Africanisms in the interpretation and management of historic sites and places will enhance the understanding of America itself.

Historic sites that are located in areas where African Americans settled earliest may have stronger cases for Africanisms. The refreshing of African culture by new arrivals over the course of centuries builds a strong foundation for the study and interpretation of Africanisms. The primary stage, the place of original dispersion, for most people of African descent in North America is the Eastern seaboard and the South—New England, the Chesapeake, the Carolinas, Florida, and Louisiana.

Some Africanisms may require additional research and analysis beyond seeking a direct connection with Africa. The context may be recognized as African American, but the African cultural connection needs to be documented and clarified, such as with shotgun house districts, independent black towns, and the names of geographic landmarks. Others, such as rice cultivation and processing have distinctly African roots that have been obscured. Interpreting a site's Africanity means explaining the migration process by which the people find themselves in locations, as well as what culture they brought with them. The migration patterns, therefore, may influence the nature of Africanisms found at historic sites.

Some sites that are not listed here have African roots and origins, but their cultural context in the United States does

not come through New World African descended communities. The Washington Monument in Washington, DC is such an example. Noted American classical architect, Robert Mills, designed the nation's monument to George Washington. The Washington Monument is an obelisk, a four-sided spire with a triangular top. This monumental architectural style first appeared in Karnak, Egypt, around B.C. 1500, and was used to honor dignitaries. The function of the Washington Monument is consistent with that of its ancient predecessors.⁽¹⁾

Gullah/Geechee Culture

Gullah/Geechee culture stretches from the Carolinas to northern Florida, leaving a distinctive mark on the historical traditions in the coastal region. Included are the Sea Islands off of South Carolina and the Golden Crescent of Georgia and Florida. The term "Gullah" is believed to be a homophone for "Gola" or Angola, and refers to those in the South Carolina Sea Islands. "Geechee" refers to those in the Georgia Sea Islands, and has a pejorative connotation of "country" or "hick." The Gullah/Geechee people possess linguistic traits, artisan skills, and agricultural and cultural practices attributable to African knowledge systems retained by those descendants. This survival is due to the relative geographic isolation of the areas and the concentrated and late influx of Africans from the same cultural zone. Gullah/Geechee culture is a repository of Africanisms and should be evaluated in light of African culture.

National Park Service interpretation programs have included Gullah culture and people. The National Park Service funded ethnographic/ethnohistorical oral histories at Kingsley plantation on Ft. George Island, Florida, and conducted ethnohistorical research at Cumberland and Amelia Islands in Georgia. It also has conducted an ethnohistorical study of African Americans at Snee Farm, Charles Pinckney National Historic Site, South Carolina. Research centers, such as the Avery Research Center for African American History and Culture at the College of Charleston and the Penn Center on St. Helena Island, which hold valuable information on Gullah culture, also contribute to this effort.

Most recently, the National Park Service initiated the Low Country Gullah Culture Special Resource Study, a study mandated by Congress. The purpose of the study is to evaluate

Gullah/Geechee culture with an eye toward preserving and interpreting it in areas within the Park Service's purview. To that end, the National Park Service is conducting meetings with Gullah communities, providing an overview of scholarly literature on the culture, producing a GIS report on places of importance in the Gullah/Geechee region, and compiling a demographic overview of the region. A full report detailing these activities is scheduled to be completed by the fall of 2002.

Teaching With Historic Places: "When Rice Was King"

National Register of Historic Places

[www.cr.nps.gov/nrl/twhp]

The National Register of Historic Places has developed nearly 100 classroom-ready teaching lesson plans in its *Teaching with*

Historic Places program. These lesson plans use National Register-listed properties to instruct readers about specific themes, events, and significant people in American history. The lesson plans are available on-line, offering another way to experience a historic place or a national park.

The *Teaching with Historic Places* staff revamped the lesson plan "When Rice Was King" to reflect the African contributions in the development of the rice industry in South Carolina. The lesson plan discusses the South's growing dependence on

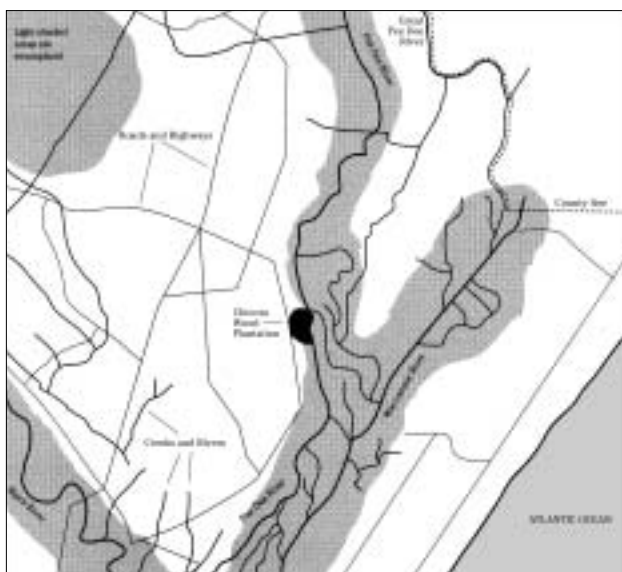


Illustration 17:

The map shows Chicora Wood Plantation in relation to the surrounding rice producing areas.

Map courtesy of *Teaching with Historic Places*, National Register of Historic Places

enslaved labor, specifically as it involved rice, South Carolina's premiere crop through much of the eighteenth century.

(*Illustration 17*) Chicora Wood was one of the most successful rice plantations in Georgetown County. By 1860, Chicora Wood served as the home base for a network of seven rice plantations throughout the county for processing rice for market. Using scholarship derived from the National Park Service's "Places of Cultural Memory: African Reflections on the American Landscape" conference, Teaching with Historic Places acknowledges the long-standing African expertise in rice cultivation in South Carolina.

Illustration 19:

The kitchen at Chicora Wood Plantation is separate from the house, mitigating the heat during the warmer months.

Photo courtesy of Charles Bayless



Scholarship in the last 40 years points to rice cultivation and processing in South Carolina as having West African roots.

The Portuguese cultivated rice and used enslaved labor in Brazil in the sixteenth century. Rice was introduced to the British North American colonies in the early part of the 1600s. However, it only became a successful cash crop for South Carolina once planters increased importation of Africans from the rice growing areas of West Africa.⁽²⁾



Illustration 18:

The processing of rice evolved from a manual process to a mechanized one, using winnowing houses and rice mills shown here in Georgetown County, SC.

Photo courtesy of Charles Bayless

At Chicora Wood, and other plantations in the coastal Carolinas, a technique of manipulating tidal flows using embankments and sluice gates to attain high levels of productivity in the flood plains of rivers and streams was practiced. Large wooden mortars and pestles were originally used to husk the rice, and winnowing baskets separated the husked kernels from their covering. Eventually, the process became mechanized, but the basic method of pounding, flailing, and winnowing remained the same. (*Illustration 18*) “When Rice Was King” uses Judith Carney’s essay from the “Places of Cultural Memory” conference to make the connection between West African rice production, the enslaved Africans used to plant rice, and the development of these techniques in South Carolina. These developments made South Carolina one of the leading rice exporters in the world.

The diet of American southerners reflects the influence of Africans who served as cooks on plantations. Rice went from a subsistence crop for the enslaved to a regular part of the

American diet. The detached kitchens on larger plantations such as Chicora Wood may also reveal an Africanism. The kitchen was kept separate from the big house on plantations, in part, to mitigate excessive heat in the main house during the warmer months. West and Central African groups, such as the Asante in Ghana, cook outside of the domicile in a courtyard space designated for communal use.⁽³⁾ (*Illustration 19*) In addition, separate kitchens lessened the chance of destruction of the home due to fire.

The planting techniques, the processing of rice, the introduction of rice to the American palate, the outbuildings, and the separation of kitchens from the house at Chicora Wood are due to African influence and underscore the knowledge transfer that took place.

Shotgun Houses at Martin Luther King, Jr. National Historic Site *Atlanta, Georgia*

Preservation of shotgun house districts has become a popular and profitable activity. One of the better known examples is



Illustration 20:
Shotgun houses are prevalent in the Sweet Auburn neighborhood. This illustration shows a double shotgun house in the Martin Luther King, Jr. Historic District.

Photo courtesy of Cheryl Shropshire

the grouping of double shotgun houses near the Martin Luther King, Jr. National Historic Site in Atlanta, Georgia. According to the “Martin Luther King, Jr. Historic Site, Cultural Landscape Report: Birth-Home Block” released in 1995 by the National Park Service, these houses were built starting in 1905. Located in the Sweet Auburn District, the shotgun houses are part of the century-old African American enclave. Originally developed in the 1870s for middle-class white homeowners, the old Fourth Ward, in which Auburn Avenue was located, had become an integrated neighborhood by the turn of the twentieth century. 1910 saw Auburn Avenue homes filled with middle-class African Americans, including the family of the Reverend A. D. Williams, maternal grandfather of Martin Luther King, Jr. The five double shotgun houses on the Birth-Home block grew to eighteen by the 1930s.⁽⁴⁾ The shotgun houses continue to be inhabited by African Americans.

In the 1980s, the Historic District Development Corporation (HDDC) rehabilitated this shotgun row and other houses (in addition to adding new construction) in the adjoining Sweet Auburn district. HDDC views the shotgun houses as

vital parts of the community and seeks to preserve its history as a place of settlement and a holder of cultural traditions for African Americans by encouraging elderly community members and families to remain in the houses. HDDC conducts heritage tours of the neighborhood that reference shotgun houses as an Africanism. The double shotgun house, the predominant type in Sweet Auburn, is particular to, but not exclusive to Georgia. (*Illustration 20, page 43*)



Illustration 21:
This grave marker commemorates the four inhabitants of Parting Ways. Recent scholarship indicates that the actual burial sites may be nearer to the homes.

Photo courtesy of Tex Avery

Illustration 21a:
This photograph shows an excavation of the Plato Turner home at Parting Ways.

Photo courtesy of Tex Avery

Parting Ways Archeological District

Plymouth, Massachusetts

People of African descent established independent towns, which bear imprints of African heritage. Parting Ways, Massachusetts was a settlement of former enslaved Africans who won their freedom by fighting in the Revolutionary War. The site is marked by a sign at the side of the road, honoring and listing the names of the original inhabitants, one of which, Quamany, is an Akan day-name for a boy born on Saturday.⁽⁵⁾ Found among the ruins of the site was pottery similar to the colono-ware vessels found in South Carolina, Virginia, and the Caribbean. The large jars were used to carry and store tamarind, a West African fruit grown in the Caribbean.⁽⁶⁾ The footprints of the house ruins correspond with those found in Caribbean villages where African people built their own housing. (*Illustration 21a*)



A small cemetery across the road from the home site holds slate gravestones. However, the actual gravesites of the inhabitants are believed to be closer to the housing ruins. (*Illustration 21*) Mounds near the location of the houses were marked with broken bottles and jars, reminiscent of Akan ritual compounds.⁽⁷⁾ The name itself, Parting Ways, is representative of an African semantic transfer, a practice of naming places for emotions, experiences, actions, and attitudes.

Artifacts from the site are on display at the 1749 Court House and Museum. Further interpretation is provided by Parting Ways: the Museum of African American and Cape Verdean History, Inc., a non-profit organization dedicated to preserving the legacy of those interred at the site. Its web site, www.partingways.org, contains additional interpretation. Parting Ways is listed in the National Register of Historic Places. Administered by the town of Plymouth, the settlement demonstrates the retention of African cultural practices evident in archeological sites and cemeteries.

Zion Poplars Baptist Church

Gloucester, Virginia

The woods could be a place of worship, of either West African deities or Christianity, without the restraints of European worship.⁽⁸⁾ As African Americans adopted Christianity, the faith took on aspects of its practitioners' past beliefs. An expression of faith for some African American Christianity was more extroverted, involving participation from the congregation and a call-and-response style of preaching. Dancing and music were active parts of the service. This form of worship diverged sharply from that of their European counterparts. Brush arbors, or bush harbors as they were sometimes known, were where enslaved Africans could practice their form of Christianity clandestinely.

With this in mind, the congregation of Zion Poplars Baptist Church built their church after the Civil War beneath seven poplar trees which were united to form a single base. This location resonated with the congregation for Christian and West and Central African reasons. The site was viewed as a

Illustration 22:

The poplars serve as a place of shelter and of worship for the congregation of Zion Poplars Baptist.

Photo courtesy of Natalie Robertson



natural miracle—the ideal place to commune with God—and a familiar location. On what had been a location to secretly practice religion was built a public place to continue their religious observance. (*Illustrations 22 and 22a*)



Illustration 22a:

Zion Poplars Baptist and its surroundings represent a continuation of West African religious practices.

Photo courtesy of Natalie Robertson

The congregation built the church, situated it and the community graveyard beneath the poplars, and named the church for those same trees. This choice of location denotes an Africanism and is valuable for interpreting Zion Poplars to tourists and the community at large, as is documented in the National Register of Historic Places nomination for Zion Poplars Baptist Church.

Poplar Forest Archeological Research

Near Lynchburg, Virginia

Located near Lynchburg, Poplar Forest was Thomas Jefferson's other plantation, besides Monticello. He inherited both properties through his father-in-law, and was one of the largest holders of enslaved Africans in central Virginia. Jefferson allowed the Africans at Poplar Forest the freedom to travel, frequently to and from Monticello, and to produce and sell the fruits of their labor on their own time. Through this commercial activity, Jefferson's enslaved Africans were able to supplement their diets and incomes.⁽⁹⁾

An examination of the North Hill and Quarter portions of the plantation revealed subfloor pits, used as storage areas within housing structures. This practice, according to Poplar Forest archeologist, Barbara Heath, may have roots in West Africa

with the Ibo of Nigeria.⁽¹⁰⁾ In addition, there is on-going archeological investigation on personal items found that may have West African antecedents.

The vegetal remains recovered from the subfloor pits contained edible and non-edible plant material, as well as bones from non-domesticated animals, which fell outside of what was known to be provided to the Quarter's inhabitants. In some cases, the plants differed from those used for European dietary and medicinal purposes. The findings suggest African knowledge systems at work. Heath cites Merrick Posnansky's research on transfer of African knowledge to the Caribbean, stating that plants from the same family were used similarly by Africans on both sides of the Atlantic. Posnansky points to the collaboration of African and Native American knowledge of plants and pharmacopoeia in adapting African practices to New World plant types.⁽¹¹⁾ Heath infers that the same transfer took place in Virginia.

Conclusion

The study of African influences in America is being incorporated into the stories of historic sites. The narratives and histories reflect the views of the communities they serve and the institutions that manage them. The addition of Africanisms to the interpretation will alter how the visitors view the site, and possibly attract new visitors altogether. Increased visitation and new audiences benefit these places in many ways, not the least of which is financially, as heritage tourism is one of the fastest growing sectors of the tourist economy.

The range of vernacular cultural contexts that is shaped by Africanisms speaks to the pervasiveness of African descendants and their collective culture in the United States. As Africanisms are researched and added to the interpretation at more historic sites, all historic site administrators are encouraged to evaluate their cultural resources for African influences.

1. In the original Washington Monument design, Mills included Neo-classical elements that were not consistent with traditional Egyptian obelisk design. The top of the Monument was nearly flat and there was a pantheon encircling the base. Two other monuments to George Washington were erected, in Baltimore and Richmond, both with Neo-Classical designs and both attributable to Mills (there is debate as to his having designed the one in Richmond). In 1879, after a lengthy delay due to the theft of stone donated by the Vatican and a lack of funding, the National Monument Society decided to leave the 300 ft. uncompleted and top it with a statue. George Perkins Marsh, U.S. ambassador to Italy and a student of Egyptian architecture, advised the Society against the statue. The ambassador argued for standard Egyptian proportions of 10:1 height to base and advised against the circular temple base. He recommended that a pyramid adorn the top, as called for by traditional design. At the time of its completion in 1884, the Monument rose 555 feet high and was the tallest structure in the world. The use of the obelisk form links America, a relatively new nation at the time, to an ancient prosperous civilization.

For more on Mills and the Washington Monuments, see Carroll Orchards, "Notes & Comments: Robert Mills, Architect and Engineer," in *Architectural Record* 40 (6) (December 1916): 583-588; H. E. Pierce Gallagher, "Robert Mills, 1781-1855: America's First Native Architect," in *Architectural Record* (May 1929): 478-484. For more on Egypt, obelisks, and the connection to the Washington Monument, see Nnamdi Ellah, *African Architecture: Evolution and Transformation* (New York and London: McGraw-Hill, 1997) and Susan Denyer *African Traditional Architecture* (New York: Africana Publishing Co., 1978). Cf. David Lowenthal, *George Perkins Marsh: Prophet of Conservation* (Seattle and London, UK: University of Washington Press, 2000), 356.

The obelisk as an African architectural form predates European, Greek, or Persian contact with Egypt. Its introduction to the United States

comes though a Western European cultural context. Obelisks have been removed from Egypt to the West since Augustinian times. Thirteen of the remaining twenty-one obelisks in the world are located in Rome. Only five exist in Egypt, and the rest are scattered throughout the world, in London, Paris, Istanbul, and most recently, New York. In the 1800s, obelisks were considered part of the Neo-Classical vocabulary. It would be safe to presume Mills, a white South Carolinian, interpreted the form through Western European culture, and not African. Furthermore, the North African origins of the architectural form do not coincide with the West African origins of the Africans brought to the New World, putting it outside of the definition of Africanisms given by Holloway. However, there is no doubt as to the African origins of obelisks and the continuity of use as memorial monumental architecture.

Future research into Africanisms may include the Washington Monument, and places like Opa-Locka, Florida, known for its Moorish architecture. Built originally for European Americans, the African American community has assumed stewardship of the buildings, and view themselves as best able to maintain its integrity, due to the cultural connection with Africa.

2. Daniel C. Littlefield states in *Rice and Slaves* that 40% of enslaved Africans entering South Carolina during the time rice was a premiere export crop were from regions of West Africa that were rice-producing for 1,000 years prior to European contact. Growing rice means having a knowledgeable labor force. As Littlefield states, "being familiar with a crop is a different matter from being familiar with the cultivation of a crop." Southern Europe had limited rice production at the time, primarily in Italy, not a country actively involved in the Atlantic slave trade. The strain of rice present in the Carolinas was consistent with an Asian variety introduced to the New World by the Portuguese, but the cultivation techniques used are different from those used in Asia. The Carolinas never used the transplanting method popular throughout Asia.

- The increased numbers of Africans from what was known as the Windward Coast corresponds with a shift from rain-fed cultivation to tidal-fed cultivation, which proved successful for Carolina planters. There were geographical and climactic similarities—sub tropical conditions and flood-plains like those in Mali along the Niger River, Senegal and Gambia near the Senegal River, and in Ghana. Judith Carney argues technologies were transferred from the region to the Carolinas, such as mortars and pestles for hulling and polishing, and flails and winnowing baskets for separating the hulls from the grains. For more detailed analyses of African rice production in the United States and the New World, see Peter H. Wood, *Black Majority: Negroes in Colonial South Carolina from 1670 Through the Stono Rebellion* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1975); Littlefield, *Rice and Slaves: Ethnicity and the Slave Trade in Colonial South Carolina* (Urbana and Chicago and Urbana: University of Illinois, 1991); Carney, *Black Rice: The African Origins of Rice Cultivation in the Americas* (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 2001). Cf. Carney, “Rice, Slaves and Landscapes of Cultural Memory” in *Places of Cultural Memory: African Reflections on the American Landscape. Conference Proceedings, May 9-12, 2001, Atlanta, GA* (Washington, DC: Department of the Interior, National Park Service, 2001), 43-61.
3. See John Michael Vlach, *Back of the Big House: The Architecture of Plantation Slavery* (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 1993), 43; Abimbola O. Asojo, “Traditional African Architecture and Its Impact on Place Making: Case Studies from African and African-American Communities,” in *Places of Cultural Memory: African Reflections on the American Landscape. Conference Proceedings, May 9-12, 2001, Atlanta, GA* (Washington, DC: Department of the Interior, National Park Service, 2001); Leland Ferguson, *Uncommon Ground: Archaeology and Early African America, 1650-1800* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1992), xxii-xxiii.
 4. The five shotguns are the first of nine built by the Empire State Investment Company. See Lucy A. Lawliss, ed., *Martin Luther King, Jr. National Historic Site Cultural Landscape Report: Birth-Home Block*, (Atlanta, GA: National Park Service, 1995), 16, fn. 21. For more detailed historical information about the shotguns, the Birth-Home site and the surrounding neighborhood, see *Cultural Landscape Report*, 11-47; National Register of Historic Places, *Martin Luther King, Jr. Historic District (Boundary Increase)*, *Fulton County, Georgia. National Register #0000741*.
 5. The inscription on the marker reads “Here lie the graves of four Negro slaves: Quamany, Prince, Plato, Cato. These men fought in the Revolutionary War and were freed at its close. The cemetery is located in the original 94 acre plot of land which was deeded to them by the U.S. government when they were given their freedom.” The town was once named New Guinea. See James Deetz, *In Small Things Forgotten: An Archaeology of Early American Life* (New York: Anchor Books, 1996), 205-206.
 6. Deetz offers that the shape of the jars is consistent with types associated with West African pottery traditions. Deetz cites no specific area or group, however Ferguson’s research points at a Nigerian tradition in colono-ware. Preliminary research into unofficial documents held by Parting Ways: the Museum of African-American and Cape Verdean History, may indicate the inhabitants were from modern Guinea-Bissau via Cape Verde, offering a Caribbean connection to the U.S. See Deetz, *In Small Things Forgotten*, 148; Ferguson, *Uncommon Ground: Archaeology and Early African America, 1650-1800*, 1-32.
 7. Multivalency—how objects take on different meanings for different social groups—must be considered in the interpretation of Parting Ways. Bottles and jars found at graves throughout the Caribbean and southern America have been reevaluated with western African funerary practices in mind, as opposed to being interpreted as refuse or litter. The spirits of the dead

reside in water, according to Kongo beliefs, and the vessels—jars and bottles—typically represented water. They would have holes in the bottom to indicate their association with the burial mound. Coins and, on occasion, food offerings have been found at gravesites. In a discussion with Deetz, Vlach states the burial deposits are reminiscent of those found in modern Ghana. See Deetz, *In Small Things Forgotten*, 207-209; see also Thompson's essay "Kongo Influences on African American Artistic Culture," in Holloway, ed., *Africanisms in American Culture* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1990) 148-184.

8. It is believed by some West African cultures that spirits reside in the bush. Some wooded areas are kept just for these spirits or deities, to ensure their favor, as in the case of Ogun, the Yorubá deity responsible for ironmongery. Similarly, Poro-Sande organizations (male and female secret societies) held sacred groves. The groves were used for puberty rites of passage for young initiates. The groups, found throughout Upper Guinea (Senegal, Gambia, Sierra Leone, and modern Liberia) served as social, political, and organizing polities. Sandra F. Barnes, "Introduction: The Many Faces of Ogun," in *Africa's Ogun, Old World and New* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1990); Margaret Washington Creel, "Gullah Attitudes Toward Life and Death," in Holloway, ed., *Africanisms in American Culture* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1990) 76-78.
9. See Barbara J. Heath, *Hidden Lives: The Archaeology of Slave Life at Thomas Jefferson's Poplar Forest* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1999), 50-52. Idem, "Bounded Yards and Fluid Boundaries: Landscapes of Slavery at Poplar Forrest," in *Places of Cultural Memory: African Reflections on the American Landscape. Conference Proceedings*, May 9-12, 2001, Atlanta, GA (Washington, DC: Department of the Interior, National Park Service, 2001), 69-81.
10. Anne Yentsch discusses the use of storage cellars for food, and to hide and protect possessions. Heath cites this discussion in *Hidden Lives*. See Anne Yentsch, "A Note on a 19th Century Description of Below Ground 'Storage Cellars' Among the Ibo," in *African-American Archaeology* 4 (1991):3.
11. See Posnansky's comments in Merrick Posnansky, "West Africanist Reflections on African American Archaeology," in Theresa Singleton, ed., *I, Too, Am America: Archaeological Studies of African-American Life* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1999), 32.



1800 1890's